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One Woman's Strength: A Closer Look at "Mother"

In her short story "The Revolt of Mother," Mary E. Wilkins Freeman introduces us to Sarah Penn, a New England wife and mother who refuses to be ignored. Mother, as she is called throughout the story, is certainly not submissive or meek; she proves herself a force to be reckoned with. Though she cares for her husband and children, and silently bears her frustration and sadness, Mother is not weak. It becomes clear as Mother's dilemma unfolds that these qualities are not signs of her husband's power over her, but symptoms of her deep conviction and unwavering strength.

From the very beginning, Mother is strong-willed and persistent. Upon questioning her husband about what is being built on their land, she stands firm while awaiting his answer. Eventually, Father sees that she is "immovable... as one of the rocks in his pastureland" and that his only recourse is to take his wagon and go, thereby escaping her (149). Even in her small and cramped house, tiny next to Father's barns, Mother is too proud to complain; when her daughter asks about the men working in their field, Sarah replies evenly that "they're diggin' for – a cellar for a new barn" (149). Despite her anger over Father's new building, and the fact that her son knew about it long before she did, Mother is serious and calm in front of her children. She does not allow them to ignore her questions or to speak ill of their father, nor does she let her true feelings show when speaking to them. When Mother finally seizes an opportunity to improve her circumstance, becoming the object of gossip and concern because of her decision, she is not swayed. Though her neighbors think her "insane" or "rebellious," and everyone from the town minister to her own children wonder excitedly how her husband will react to her bold move, Mother continues on as if there is nothing unusual or shocking in her actions (157). Sarah Penn is a woman who knows her own mind.

Though she is a dutiful and industrious woman, Sarah is not subservient or naïve. She knows that she must fulfill her role as wife and mother, and does so artfully. Though Mother is not satisfied with her place, she keeps her house immaculate. She is very skilled in her duties, and cares for her husband well, carrying out her tasks in a way that gives no sign of how hard she is working. Mother takes solace in her work, and does it to the best of her ability. Tending fully to her husband's needs and caring diligently for her home, Mother also works hard to prepare her children well, and see that they are respectful. With her son, Mother is stern; Sammy is stubborn, like his father, and does not readily acknowledge the woman's authority. Though the boy attempts to ignore his mother's questions, she does not yell or scold him; simply repeating her question, Mother asks "Sammy, I want you to tell me if he's goin' to buy more cows," making it clear to her son that, while she knows he is loyal to his father, he must also answer to her (150). In turn, she is protective of her daughter, who she sees as weak, and not entirely able to care for herself or to meet her future role as wife. In speaking with Nanny, Mother tells her daughter the way it is with "men-folk" and that she "hadn't ought to judge [her] father" or expect it to go differently with her new husband (150). Mother reminds Nanny to be grateful for the good in her home and her father, rather than complaining that she does not have a nicer place to live. Telling her daughter that men "don't look at things jest the way" women do, she points out that "the roof don't leak" and that Nanny doesn't have to "go out an' work for [her] livin'" (150). Despite her own feelings about her home and Father's attitudes, Mother makes clear to her children that their father is a good provider. Even after meeting with stiff opposition from her husband, reticent acknowledgement from her son, and pitiful complaint from her daughter, Mother returns to her responsibilities and does not allow her resentment to show.

Sarah Penn is a woman who is not only hard-working and smart, but exceedingly proud. When she addresses Father about the new barn being built in their field – the field he promised to build her house in forty years earlier- she makes a logical appeal rather than an emotional plea. Only in Nanny and Sammy's absence is she willing to "talk real plain" to Father about his plans (152). Asking Father outright if he "thinks [he's] doin' right an' accordin' to what [he] profess[ed]," Mother knows that he cannot answer her truthfully

without admitting that he is wrong (153). She points out that she has been an ideal wife and mother, even processing the milk from Father's many cows into butter without complaint, despite her dismal lodgings. Father has been successful and she has been frugal, helping him to add to their estate. Appealing to his sense of fairness, Sarah tells her husband that "there ain't another woman in the whole town whose husband ain't got half the means you have but what's got better" (152). She makes clear that his lot has improved, but her home has not. After father's refusal to consider her wishes, Mother does not show her sadness or resentment to her family. She cries in private, once, then goes right back to her duties, making shirts and pies for her husband, keeping house and minding the children. She does not speak to Father again about the barn, despite it being the talk of the town, and she is careful not to show her excitement when the opportunity for action arises. Helping him pack and sending him off with cheese and pie, Sarah makes sure that her husband is looking his best and will be well fed on his journey. At first Mother doubts herself, but then thinking of her daughter and the Lord, she realizes that she has an opportunity and a right to answer her own troubles.

When her husband is called away, Mother emerges as the strong and self-determined woman of her house. Knowing that she is doing what is best for herself and her children, she is not deterred by the judgment of others. Once she has made up her mind to move her house into the barn, Mother does not waver in her resolve. When the cart of hay pulls up to the new barn, ready to be unloaded, she takes action. Stopping the men from dirtying the new barn, Sarah tells them to unload the hay into the old barn. One of the workers assures her that there will be plenty of space for it there, remarking that they "didn't need the new barn, nohow, far as room's concerned" (155). Both Nanny and the workmen are confused, thinking that father must have changed his mind; it does not occur to them that the decision is Mother's to make. As soon as the move is underway, she is efficient in her task; Mother wastes no time, and shows clear authority in directing her children. She sets out lunch for Nanny and Sammy, telling them to eat quickly as she begins packing up her kitchen. Instructing her children firmly and calmly, Mother gives them no indication of her plans and no opportunity to question her. During the move, and once it is accomplished, both her

daughter and her son are amazed and excited by what their mother is doing. By dinner time, it is done, and none of them can believe that father's new barn has been transformed into Sarah's new home.

When the neighbors start to talk and the minister comes to call, even when father returns home, Mother makes clear that the decision to move into the barn was rightfully hers to make. Upon the minister's visit, Mother speaks to him as an equal. She interrupts his speech to tell him that "there ain't no call for nobody else to worry about it," and that "nobody but the Lord is goin' to dictate" her thoughts or actions (157). Her confidence and assertiveness confuse and frighten the man, who is not accustomed to being spoken to so plainly – especially by a woman. When Father returns home the next day, Mother awaits him with a nice dress on and his favorite dinner ready. The man wears his shock and hurt on his face, and Mother answers it reassuringly, telling him that she's "done [her] duty by [him] forty year, an [she's] goin' to do it now; but [she's] goin' to live here," in the barn (158). Mother helps him to wash up for the meal, and then serves him as she has always done. She wants to make it easy for him to accept the change, but she is also clear that he has no choice but to accept it. Even after presenting herself as strong and unwavering, Mother makes sure to remind Father of his place as head of household by asking him to give a blessing before the meal. When Sarah finds her husband on the porch after dinner, weeping, she offers consolation and is overjoyed when he tells her between sobs that he'll "put up the – partitions, an' – everything" she's asked for (159). Mother takes even this final victory in stride; she has bested him, but she does not gloat.

Father's mistake is in reading Mother's strength as weakness, believing that she is obliged to bow to his will. She is dutiful and industrious as a wife, and he confuses her patience and attention to detail with compliance and submission to his needs. Father thinks her obedient, not realizing that Mother is too proud to neglect her husband or her home; Mother sees that she has a stake in his success, even if Father is blind to it. Mother does not allow her children to disrespect their father, nor does she allow them to complain. She is trying to teach her son and daughter to be grateful and respectful, to bear their frustrations quietly, as she has done. Despite his attempts to ignore her, Sarah proves herself a dominant

figure in her husband's life. Because she hadn't complained, Mother appeared acquiescent to Father's wishes. He thought that she was too weak to defy him, but in the end finds that she is too strong not to.

Works Cited

Freeman, Mary E. Wilkins. "The Revolt of 'Mother'." *American Short Stories*. Ed. Bert
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